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# ***'Two children to make ends meet': the ideal family size, parental responsibilities and costs of children on two sides of the Iron Curtain during the post-war fertility decline***

Yuliya Hilevych<sup>a,b,c</sup> and Caroline Rusterholz<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; <sup>b</sup>Economic, Social and Demographic History, Radboud Universiteit Faculteit der Letteren, Nijmegen, Netherlands; <sup>c</sup>Nederlands Interdisciplinair Demografisch Instituut, Den Haag, Netherlands; <sup>d</sup>Department of History, Classics and Archaeology, Birkbeck College, University of London, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

## **ABSTRACT**

One of the major corollaries of the post-war fertility boom and decline is that two-child families became common across Europe after the 1970s. Despite the general agreement on the convergence of fertility trends, there is still little understanding of how this change took place in a comparative perspective of Western and Eastern Europe, which at that time were characterised by Cold War tensions of different ideological regimes. This study addresses this aspect by focusing on individual decisions around childbearing, child-rearing and family size. Based on 104 oral histories from Switzerland and Ukraine, this study illuminates that the urban setting provided parents with a similar set of constraints and opportunities, which eventually resulted in strikingly similar perceptions of the costs of childrearing on two sides of the Iron Curtain. Individuals' motives to postpone first birth in Switzerland and second birth in Ukraine rested on a similar aspiration to invest in the well-being of children by ensuring material security for the family. This aim was increasingly achieved through female labour-force participation and adoption of modern contraception – the pill in Switzerland and abortion in Ukraine. While the timing of returning to the labour market and the share of women working after entering parenthood might have varied across the two contexts, a good mother became increasingly defined in both contexts in terms of providing emotionally and financially for her children. Although the introduction of modern birth control methods allowed couples to plan family size more carefully, it also made Swiss and Ukrainian women increasingly carry the major costs and actual burden of birth control. Altogether, this study challenges the common assumption around the persistence of strikingly different demographic realities in post-war Western and Eastern Europe by uncovering the mechanisms behind the stabilisation of family size around the two-child family ideal.

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**CONTACT** Yuliya Hilevych  [y.hilevych@gmail.com](mailto:y.hilevych@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

The last decade has seen an increasing interest in the study of the post-war fertility boom and decline in Europe (Caldwell, 2001; Caldwell & Schindlmayr, 2003; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Oinonen, 2008; Van Bavel & Reher, 2013; Wilson, 2011). One of the major corollaries of these demographic trends is the stabilisation of family size around two-child families after the 1970s (Caldwell & Schindlmayr, 2003; Frejka, 2008; Goldstein, Lutz, & Testa, 2003; Oinonen, 2008; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014; Wilson, 2011). While there is general agreement on the convergence of fertility trends across Europe, our knowledge is very limited on how these similar demographic changes took place under different ideological regimes and socio-economic conditions of the Cold War era in Western and Eastern Europe. This is probably due to the fact that Cold War tensions laid the foundation for studying social life and hence demographic realities in capitalist and communist societies as contrasting to each other.

Studies of fertility decline in Western Europe have largely focused on uncovering the reasons behind the baby boom and the subsequent baby bust in the post-war decades (Sandström, 2014; Van Bavel & Reher, 2013). The transition from the baby boom to the baby bust and the associated decrease in family size is often explained by the rise of individualisation and individual self-realisation (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987, 2002) and the 'sexual revolution' that led to nearly universal acceptance of modern contraceptives, most notably the birth control pill (Cook, 2004). In the East, however, the absence of a baby boom is linked to the significant loss of the male population, while the rapid post-war fertility decline and decreasing family size are associated with universal female employment and the emergence of the so-called women's double burden (Blum, 2003, 2004; Lapidus, 1978; Vishnevskij, 2006; Zakharov, 2008). Moreover, the re-legalisation of abortion is also thought to have accelerated this decline.

Indeed, the paths of the post-war fertility declines in Western and Eastern Europe were surrounded by distinctive demographic trends and accelerated by seemingly different political and institutional constraints. If taken for granted, this conclusion also invites the assumption that individuals must have decided differently about childbearing, childrearing and regulation of family size in the West than they did in the East. However, recent studies of everyday lives under capitalism and communism offer a different narrative. They have shown that individual realities on both sides of the Iron Curtain were, in fact, not that different and often surrounded by similar struggles to meet certain living standards and private life aspirations (Carter, 1997; Gerchuk, 2000; Reid, 2002, 2009; Reid & Crowley, 2000; Zakharova, 2013). More importantly, the convergence in fertility rates in Western and Eastern Europe around the two-child family ideal also suggests that some similar processes were happening on the micro-level. While these historical and demographic accounts indicate potential similarities behind the post-war changes in individuals' reproductive decisions on both sides of the Iron Curtain, individuals' accounts on changing family size have rarely been studied through a comparative perspective of Western and Eastern Europe.

This study is the first attempt to look beyond the divergence narrative of post-war demographic trends by focusing on individual decisions around childbearing, child-rearing and family size. We consider that decision-making around family size reflects individuals' perceptions of the costs of childrearing and contraception (Alter, 1992; Szreter, 1996). Following this theoretical perspective, this study aims to explore what women and men perceived as

their parental responsibilities in the context of changing living standards and how they decided and tried to limit their family size in the post-war decades, from around 1950 to 1975.

Based on 104 oral history accounts of mothers and fathers from Switzerland and Ukraine, our findings illuminate that despite divergent political and economic contexts, the urban setting provided Swiss and Ukrainian parents with a somewhat similar set of constraints and opportunities. These constraints and opportunities eventually resulted in strikingly similar perceptions of the costs of childrearing and contraception, which led individuals to reduce their family size. In this respect, this study challenges the assumption that individuals decided differently about their family and reproductive lives on the two sides of the Iron Curtain and, as we illustrate below, the study also reveals the importance of adopting a micro-level analysis of individual behaviours to go beyond dominant macro-level narratives in demography – many of which have prevailed since the Cold War – in order to explain the present-day realities.

## Theoretical Background

Theoretically, we depart from the cost-benefit framework developed by the demographer George Alter (1992). According to this perspective, parents weigh the costs and benefits of having an additional child while considering the costs of contraception. This economic concept has been enhanced to integrate the 'perceived relative costs of childrearing', as Simon Szreter (1996) defines it. He stresses that it is not only the economic and emotional costs of having children that influence individuals' fertility decisions, but also larger sociocultural, ideological, institutional and political factors that shape parental responsibilities and ideas about family size. Importantly, this does not imply that each of these factors is the universal driver of any fertility decline, but rather that these political, cultural, ideological and social forces and events must be considered at the level of local communities that experience changes that are specifically relevant for them (Hilevych, 2016b; Kreager & Bochow, 2017; Rusterholz, 2017; Szreter, 2015). In addition, we do not consider couples who assess the 'perceived relative costs of childrearing' as homogeneous 'black boxes'; rather, we believe that this appraisal may differ between wives and husbands (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000; Janssens, 2007; Mackinnon, 1995; Praz, 2007; Watkins, 1993). The way in which parents perceive the costs of childrearing is intrinsically linked to the way they understand the gendered meaning of parental responsibilities (Pooley, 2013; Rusterholz, 2015a, 2017).

In Western Europe, the changing costs of having children are often argued to be the major precondition of fertility decline. Historians have generally analysed the period 1955–1975 as one of transition from the traditional bourgeois family model to an individualistic family. The former is characterised by asymmetrical gender roles of parenthood, while the latter is defined as more egalitarian in terms of spousal relationships and more modern because individuals have become emancipated from traditional norms (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987, 2002). In this framework, motivation to limit family size changed from an altruistic investment in child quality to self-realisation, as children have become a means of this 'self-realisation'. Recently, however, the idea of two successive motives has been challenged by Van Bavel (2010), who suggests that the explanations given for the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) are very similar to the ones given contemporaneously for the low and

declining fertility in the interwar period, i.e. secularisation, individualisation, leisure and rising consumerism.

On the contrary, in the historiography of the Soviet fertility decline, reproductive behaviour change is often linked to socio-economic hardships and overall population changes taking place throughout the twentieth century, such as the First and Second World Wars, and the mass repression and famines during Stalinism (Blum, 2003, 2004; Vishnevskij, 2006; Zakharov, 2008). In this context, the post-war decades inherited the outcomes of these demographic changes, most significantly the shortage of male population. Alongside these population changes, the legalisation of abortion, universal secondary education and female labour-force participation are argued to have reinforced the fertility decline in the region (Blum, 2003, 2004; Vishnevskij, 2006) through the appearance of women's double burden (Lapidus, 1978). As such, the double burden, alongside with the rather limited availability of grandparental support, especially in the urban context, and the overall nuclearisation of urban households in the course of Soviet family politics, significantly increased the perceived costs of childcare (Hilevych, 2016a; 2016b).

Another dispute dividing the scholars of Western and Eastern fertility decline is the debate surrounding gendered responsibilities of birth control and the methods used to limit family size. There has been a long-standing assumption that women, because they carry the burden of pregnancy, have been the driving force behind fertility limitation practises (Gittins, 1982). Recent oral history studies on Western and Eastern Europe, however, have challenged and complicated this narrative by showing how responsibility for birth control could be gendered depending on the cultural, social and institutional context (Claro, 2016; Fisher, 2006; Hilevych, 2015; Rusterholz, 2015b; Szreter & Fisher, 2010). Moreover, it has been argued that a shift in contraceptive methods took place in the second half of the twentieth century; traditional methods, such as withdrawal, which was deemed to be mainly a man's responsibility, are said to have been replaced by modern and primarily women-controlled methods of birth control (Cook, 2004), such as the contraceptive pill in post-war Western Europe and abortion in Eastern Europe. What, however, still remains unclear in the context of the comparison between West and East is whether the costs of contraception and traditional methods, which were still commonly used in the post-war decades, remained men's responsibility or alongside modern methods also became women's responsibility, and how this was reflected, if at all, in the overall changing costs of children.

## Data and Methodology

This study is based on 104 biographical interviews with men and women belonging to the lower middle and working classes living in an urban environment, who entered parenthood between 1955 and 1975.<sup>1</sup> Among these 104 interviews, 56 interviews were with parents from Ukraine and 48 with parents from Switzerland. Originally, these interviews were collected as parts of two different projects: one on parenthood decisions and fertility changes in Switzerland, and the other on family relationships and reproductive decision-making during the fertility decline in Soviet Ukraine. To meet the aims of this study, we analysed the two samples by following the same methodology, which was possible because both interview guides contained questions on parental responsibilities and family limitation decisions. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and thematically analysed separately for the two contexts: Atlas.ti qualitative software was used to perform the analysis on

the Ukrainian interviews and NVivo was used for the Swiss interviews. We developed the same coding techniques and similar coding structures, which allowed us to follow the same guidelines when performing a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2012). Every interview was first analysed independently, after which it was compared with other interviews to identify contrasts, overlaps and similarities. Detailed descriptions of the samples, considerations of oral history methodology and the precautions that this type of data required have been developed in greater depth in our previous works (Hilevych, 2016b; Rusterholz, 2017).

Importantly, focusing on the same social classes in the urban environment allows us to have comparable data, because the socio-economic transformations experienced in Switzerland and Ukraine during the 1960s primarily affected the working class and the lower strata of the middle class. Oral history is particularly meaningful for studying a period of transition where different behaviours coexisted and were challenged (Thompson, 2000). More importantly, as our analysis shows, this method allows for the identification of negotiations and compromises elaborated by those who witnessed these changes, and, more importantly, the way they dealt with constraints and dominant norms, which typically would be obscured in aggregate data. For this reason, these individual accounts should not be treated as representative of the entire populations of Switzerland and Ukraine, but interpreted through the depth of the insight they provide into individuals' experiences of post-war fertility decline in two strikingly different urban environments. This knowledge, in turn, should further help to identify the macro-level indicators underlying the convergence of fertility trends on the macro level.

## Context

Between 1955 and 1975, the majority of Western European countries witnessed the transition from the baby boom to the baby bust. In Switzerland, the decrease in fertility after the baby boom was rapid. Considering the evolution of the total fertility rate since the turn of the twentieth century, one can observe a constant decrease in fertility until its lowest point of 1.8 children per woman before the Second World War in 1937. Fertility then recovered to 2.62 children per woman in 1945, before falling to 2.3 in 1955. The second baby boom was then perceptible, with a peak of 2.68 children per woman in 1964, followed by a dramatic drop to 1.5 by 1976 (*Bureau fédéral de statistique*, 1977). This period between 1955 and 1970 was also significant for economic growth, and scholars frequently refer to it as the 'Golden Age'. Subsequently, an increase in the purchase of consumer goods, such as cars, washing machines, televisions, radios and refrigerators, whose strong demand led to a reduction in prices, seems to have been one of the main features of this period. The budget share that Swiss families allocated to food, housing and clothing, which had been important in previous decades, decreased, leaving them with more disposable income to spend on other needs (Leimgruber & Fischer, 1999; Skenderovic & Spati, 2012; Tanner, 1994, 1998). Alongside this economic situation, the institutional context also changed: secondary education became democratised; the traditional sexual division of labour was strongly encouraged by the welfare system and by social norms, as conveyed in newspapers and magazines; and women gained the right to vote in 1971. All of these conditions were conducive to family limitation (Rusterholz, 2017). The sale of contraceptives was legally allowed, though the advertisement of such products was prohibited. The contraceptive pill became available on prescription on the Swiss market in 1961. From 1946, abortion was allowed on medical grounds: when

the health of the mother was in danger and after two practitioners had to agree on the necessity of the procedure.

In contrast, in Ukraine, fertility only started to decline in the 1910s, but the speed of the decline was rapid. Similarly to other Eastern Bloc countries, Ukraine did not experience a baby boom, and by 1960 the fertility rate in Ukraine had declined to a below-replacement level of 2.05 (Steshenko, 2010). This period is often defined as a latent depopulation (Vishnevskij, 2006). Furthermore, the Soviet-style post-war modernisation, most significantly the rural–urban migration and new social housing (*khrushchevka*), clearly promoted the nuclear model of Soviet families, with the emphasis on the couple rather than on the extended family (Hilevych, 2016b). Additionally, the production and consumption of various electronic appliances, such as refrigerators, washing machines and televisions, increased significantly in the post-war decades (Hanson, 2014). Although the Soviet regime argued for abandoning bourgeois consumerist practices, consumption became a ‘crucial concern in the Soviet response to the Cold War’ as Khrushchev’s regime recognised the need to increase the quantity, quality and range of consumer goods in order to improve living standards, particularly those of nuclear families (Hanson, 2014; Lapidus, 1978; Reid, 2002, 2009). The particularity of Soviet consumer culture was that while shortages were visible in all areas of life, from food and clothing to electronics and housing, they were still possible to acquire. Moreover, the state was constantly increasing average income while keeping prices stable and relatively low, which contributed to the overall perception of improving living standards (Hanson, 2014; Reid, 2009). Finally, the post-war decades were significant for the re-legalisation of abortion (1955), which was available on demand to any woman and was frequently practised as a birth control method (Popov & David, 1999). Besides abortion, however, men and women were limited to methods with extensive failure rates, such as withdrawal, vaginal douches, the rhythm method or Soviet-made condoms (Hilevych & Sato, 2018), which were known for their poor quality (Popov & David, 1999; Remennick, 1991).

## Results

### *Individual motives for limiting family size: increasing costs of children*

Both Swiss and Ukrainian parents used their children’s well-being as the main motive behind their aspirations to limit family size. Our analysis shows the existence of a common belief that families with more than two or three children would not be able to achieve proper well-being for their children. The accounts of Anna from Ukraine, a mother of two who was a factory worker for her entire life, and Andrea from Switzerland, a mother of three who worked as a nurse before marriage and became a housewife afterwards, illustrate this element:

Anna: I wanted to have three children but my husband did not want it. He did not want our children to become beggars, you know. We wanted to raise our children properly and not in the way we grew up ourselves...and had hard childhoods, you know. So, we knew that we had to provide our children with everything and that’s why we did not want to have more children.<sup>2</sup>

Andrea: I had three children and it was enough for me. Because if we wanted to give them a good upbringing, so that they could study if they wanted to, having a large family, especially in an urban setting, was too difficult. Thus, having three children was enough.<sup>3</sup>



Despite being in different employment situations after marriage, Anna and Andrea hold similar views on the hardship associated with having a large family in an urban setting. Moreover, they both referred to children's well-being as a central motive for limiting family size. Similarly to these accounts, the notion of 'providing parents', those who gave their children a good upbringing and secured their well-being, was also central in other informants' narratives and often entailed specific tasks on the part of the parents. This child-centred view and related gendered parental responsibilities needs to be understood in line with informants' own childhood experiences, which reinforced a common perception of increasing childrearing costs, both material and social, in the post-war decades.

The informants often presented schooling and its related material costs as essential to their children's upbringing. Schooling was seen not as optional, but as an integral part of overall children's well-being, as the account of the Swiss informant Bernard vividly illustrates. After completing his apprenticeship as a postman, Bernard married a working-class woman in 1966 and they had two children. To improve his family's material situation, he began a training programme as a policeman while he continued working as a postman. Bernard explained that having two children allowed him to fulfil his parental responsibility of providing his children with a good education:

In my time, the average family size was around two. I mean, there were families with four or three children but hardly ever more than that. That was like this because we wanted to rear them properly, to provide them with a good upbringing, to give them the opportunity to study, to give them a good situation.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar fashion, Maksim, who first worked as a taxi driver and later, after pursuing higher education at the technical institute, as a factory engineer in Ukraine, linked his decision to stop having children after the second child to his aspirations of securing adequate material well-being for his children. Even though in the Soviet context the state provided parents with free schooling and often even supported basic childcare expenses such as school uniforms and books, Maksim was nevertheless convinced that having more than two children would have resulted in material hardship for the family:

Interviewer: Why did you decide to have children no more children after the second one?

Maksim: I was an engineer and my salary was not high, around 110 *rubels*. And she worked as a nanny and earned around 80 *rubels* per month. And we had two children already. Then, the older one went to school. So, it did not seem possible to us. [...] One thing is that you need to get some everyday things for them and also some basic things for the school.<sup>5</sup>

In both contexts, the standards of providing a good upbringing implied much more financial investment than just schooling. Childcare costs often encompassed many extras, such as additional private (study or bedroom) space for them in the apartment, toys and leisure activities, which were often linked to the urban way of life and the set of opportunities and constraints it provided. A Swiss informant, Lotti, wife of an educator and mother of two children, recalled that she wanted to have more than two children, but the material constraints associated with the urban way of life, specifically the housing situation, prevented her from following this aspiration:

When I was a teenager, I wanted more than two children. But when we moved to Lausanne and to a flat, I thought that if we were able to handle things with two children it was already well done. After our second child was born, I did not want another one. After the second child, I took the pill. I did it because of the size of our flat and because of our jobs and also because



we realised that life was becoming more and more difficult. Two children to make ends meet, to pull through was enough.<sup>6</sup>

Another Swiss informant, Sylvie, explained how her desire to offer her children an enjoyable life, comparably good with that of other children growing up in the neighbourhood, motivated her to limit the size of her own family to two children:

Interviewer: Why do you have two children?

Sylvie: Because they say that having only one child is not healthy, but for me having three children was too much. It was too expensive, especially since we wanted them to have a nice and enjoyable life.

Interviewer: And what does it mean to you to have a nice and enjoyable life?

Sylvie: (laughing) To always have something to eat on the table, be able to go on holiday and that they could have a bike too, and that they could have what other children had (laughing).

Interviewer: Did you think that if you had more than two children it would have been difficult to give them what other children had?

Sylvie: Yes, we did. More obviously, it would have prevented them from having what they wanted, from having a good upbringing.<sup>7</sup>

Among the Swiss informants, the decision to stop childbearing and a two-child family size were often justified by the desire for a certain level of well-being for the already-born children and for the family as a whole. For example, Véronique referred to the size of her family as not only the 'norm' at that time, but also as an opportunity to raise the material level of her family's welfare. She first worked as a laboratory assistant, and after marrying a graphic designer in 1964, had her first child in 1966. She then quit her job to take care of the first and second child, who was born a few years later, in 1969:

Véronique: You know that the more children you have, the more expensive it becomes, especially in Switzerland. You could not allow yourself to say that the third child meant giving up on a washing machine and the fourth on holiday. At that time, in reality it was like that, that having more than two children meant giving up on a washing machine, or car, or on whatever else!<sup>8</sup>

Among the Ukrainian informants, material costs were also associated with an urban way of life and specifically the housing situation, which seemed to affect how some of the informants redefined their childbearing aspirations during marital life. Martha, a mother of two, acknowledged: *My husband and I thought that if we had a nice big flat, we would have had many children. But we had only one room and there was no space to even accommodate them.*<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Maria, a working mother, together with her husband who worked in the military, could only afford the basic things necessary to secure the desired living standard for her children. In her view, material constraints explained why she only had one child. At the same time, Maria's standard of parenthood was high, as she first tried to invest in her child's leisure and personal development, which were more easily achieved in urban areas at that time in Ukraine.

I wanted our child to be able to do different things. She [Maria's daughter] even went to take some circus lessons. I wanted to give her all that I could and I knew that she had a talent for it.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the longing for certain material investments in children's well-being and development, an important role was also played by other social costs, such as the time and emotional energy spent on children. More importantly, these social costs were also pronounced in the context of submitting to certain childcare standards, such as being an attentive and well-rested parent, which were often of concern to mothers. Especially prevalent among the

Swiss informants, these motherhood standards were often presented as the main reason for spacing or stopping childbearing. Martine married an engineer in 1955, and became a mother of two children, born in 1960 and 1963. She was trained as a lab technician and became a housewife after her first child was born. She presented her emotional and time-related investment in the children as the main reason behind her decisions to space the two births:

Martine: We postponed the second birth and we thought three years between them was great. Well, we waited and we were careful.

Interviewer: Why did you want to wait for the second?

Martine: It was for taking care of the first one properly before... That we did not have both in consecutive years because I always felt sorry for people who had twins. And having one right after the other is even worse than twins. At least twins have the same rhythm. One after the other is awful, you are constantly trying to take care of the kids, it's very tiring, time consuming, it's much too exhausting.<sup>11</sup>

The Ukrainian informants also connected the social costs of childcare to their decision to space births. However, the notion of parental time and emotional investment in children was intertwined with the long-term perspective of parental assistance for children, which often continued after schooling and sometimes extended into marital life (Hilevych, 2016b). Kateryna, who was born in 1942, married a woodworker in 1966, worked in a factory for her entire life and in 1967 gave birth to her first and only child, explained this view:

Kateryna: Once you have a child, you are responsible for this child. You support and guide it through life. You should give education to this child. You should give everything. As long as you have the possibilities, you should provide everything for your children. But if you don't have any more, then they should try to do it themselves. But it is your child, and as a parent you should always help them.<sup>12</sup>

These aspirations to encourage children's material and social well-being through educational involvement, leisure, adequate housing and parental time were closely linked to the childhood experiences and hardships that the informants themselves went through during their childhoods, most commonly due to financial constraints in the case of Switzerland and the war in the case of Ukraine. As a result, and as many of the aforementioned accounts show, informants were aware of the high costs of raising children. Indeed, in the period of post-war economic transition in the West, where the standard of living improved and access to consumer goods were democratised, acquiring these goods was a sign of social status and thus a way to ensure one's reputation in the neighbourhood. In this respect, the emergence of the notion of parental investment in children's development often derived from personal childhood experiences. As the experience of the Swiss informant Marie-Jeanne, born in 1944, vividly illustrates, an effort was made by her parents, particularly her mother, to allow her to receive a post-primary education: *My mother worked in order to pay for me to go to secondary school because I was a very good student. She worked really hard. She did housework for others so as to pay for me to go to a private secondary school.* In 1964, Marie-Jeanne married a coachbuilder; they had two daughters. Even though she faced financial difficulties during her matrimonial life, she was committed to guaranteeing her daughters not only secondary education, which was vital to her, but also a certain level of well-being through access to leisure and other education activities. As such, Marie-Jeanne emphasised the difference she tried to make in her children's lives, compared to what she experienced herself as a child:

I always tried not to penalise them vis-à-vis other children. It means that they took ski lessons. Jeanne had dance lessons and Claire music classes. I would love them to play the piano. I always tried not to discriminate them against other children. They had ice skates because they loved ice hockey.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, among the Ukrainian informants, aspirations to provide children with more than just the basic needs of food, clothing and schooling were also anchored in increasing access to certain goods and possibilities. During the Khrushchev era, these aspirations emerged out of changing social-economic standards in the private sphere of life that were especially prominent in urban areas and seemed to serve as the motive for limiting family size among the Ukrainian informants. As such, in both contexts, at the intersection of these personal childhood experiences and later parenthood realities emerged a more unified idea and standard about parental responsibilities and the way parents should ensure decent well-being for their children. These parental responsibilities were also accompanied by a certain degree of social pressure that parents would often experience if they did not submit to this standard. Importantly, the urban setting allowed for this pressure to be exercised on an everyday basis, as parents could more easily observe the lives of other families. The notion of good upbringing implied similar perceived costs of having children among the Swiss and Ukrainian informants. That said, these similarities need be understood in the context of the different pathways for achieving desired family size and well-being in Switzerland and Ukraine, which were often discussed through the ideas and decisions regarding timing of parenthood and female employment, as we discuss in the following section.

### ***Achieving desired family size and well-being***

It is an accepted fact that the timing of first and second births followed different trajectories in Western and Eastern Europe in the post-war decades, and our informants were no exceptions to these trends. However, we observe similar motives that persuaded some Swiss couples to postpone the first birth and some Soviet Ukrainian couples to postpone the second birth. Among the most common reasons to postpone entrance into parenthood invoked by the Swiss informants were the aspiration to settle down properly and to secure living standards through saving some money and buying furniture. It was also notable that the desire to delay the first birth arose mainly among individuals who were new to the urban environment and had fewer financial resources or actual support from their families. For example, Carlo, a skilled worker who was married to a dressmaker in 1960, and had three children, born in 1962, 1965 and 1968, with the last being unplanned, explained that the two-year gap between the marriage and the birth of the first child was connected to his desire to become more financially secure:

Interviewer: Was it a conscious decision to wait a bit before having your first child?

Carlo: Yes, it was, two years at least. Only to be able to settle, to see things coming and to have some savings.<sup>14</sup>

Among the Ukrainian informants, aspirations to achieve a certain level of material well-being were also linked to postponement behaviour; however, this was not in the context of the first birth but rather the second. The aspiration to postpone the second rather than first birth was largely connected to the fact that in the Soviet context men and women often did not intend to secure their entire living situation prior to marriage and first birth and many continued to live with and rely on their parents in these matters, at least with regard to the

first birth (Hilevych, 2016b). However, the second birth was seen as a point by which parents themselves should have secured a living standard for the family (Hilevych, 2016a), which in the Swiss context could be observed around the entrance into parenthood (Rusterholz, 2017). The account of Zoya, who was born in 1938 in Ukraine, had her two children at the age of 28 and 35, respectively and worked as a technologist for most of her life, illustrates that she decided to have her second child after starting to feel more materially secure in life.

In 1972, my parents moved out [to another city] and we had their apartment for ourselves. Everything seemed to become stable and I thought that I was ready to have a second child. It felt like the right time.<sup>15</sup>

The aspirations to secure material well-being of the family were often achieved through a dual-earned model. Despite the differences in the legal regulation of female labour-force participation in the two contexts – which was compulsory in Soviet Ukraine and thus often universal, while in Switzerland it was optional yet often practised by middle and low-income families – the majority of women worked until the birth of a child and hence contributed to acquiring the basic needs for the arrival of the child. In addition, many women had and tried to return to the labour market soon after the first birth in order to maintain the family's income and hence desired well-being. For this reason, the Ukrainian informants often tried to postpone having a second child by at least five years (for more on this topic see (Hilevych, 2016a)). Furthermore, the informants were especially cautious about pregnancies following their second birth, which most frequently resulted in abortions, sometimes even without the husband's consent (see also (Hilevych, 2015)). The experience of Varvara, who worked for her entire life in a factory, married a worker in 1957 and had two children, born in 1958 and 1963, illuminates her decision to have an abortion after falling pregnant again after her second child in order to continue working:

Interviewer: You said that you got pregnant soon after your son (second child) again. And did you tell your husband? Did you discuss this pregnancy?

Varvara: Well, I did tell him that I was pregnant and that I wanted to continue working. That was it. It was not even a matter to be discussed further. I did not plan to have three children.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, some Swiss families in precarious financial situations also considered female employment to make a significant contribution to the family's overall income and standard of living, which often meant deciding to stop childbearing and return to the labour market soon after birth. Silvio and Francesca are an illustrative example of this behaviour. Both born in Italy in 1938 and 1940, respectively, they moved to Switzerland for work in order to accumulate some savings with the intention of returning to Italy. Eventually, however, they stayed in Switzerland and had their children there. Silvio explained that with an additional child, his wife would not have been able to maintain her participation in the labour market, an essential monetary contribution to the family's well-being:

Silvio: If she could have stayed at home, if I had an adequate salary to allow her to stay at home, three or four children would have been lovely. But after two, we thought that it was enough.

Interviewer: And you, Madam, did you ever consider stopping working?

Francesca: Well, when I was pregnant with the second child there were many colleagues of the same age who wanted to work part-time but unfortunately our boss never agreed. Then, it was that if we changed our jobs we would have lost almost 1000 Swiss francs because elsewhere it was really paid less. I mean that it made me

think about it. Well, I have always worked full-time and honestly I don't know how I handled everything and kept the situation going for so long. My children have grown up and I am so lucky they are not drug addicts. We could have been at work during the day and sometimes also during the evenings. When I was at home, I was at home with them. But it was hard, let's be honest.

Silvio: You know, after we started to have a nice standard of living: being able to earn enough money for a four-room apartment, to have a car... We got used to it... to go every year to Italy to see our family.<sup>17</sup>

Francesca's account also reveals the contradictory feelings she experienced when going back to the labour market. While positively acknowledging her contribution to the family's well-being, she nevertheless felt guilty for not spending enough time with her children. As such, she seems to have internalised the contemporaneous injunction of motherly presence spread by the Swiss media and formulated by psychologists, associating maternal absence with negative consequences in children's development (Rusterholz, 2017).

Overall, the Swiss informants' justification for delaying entrance into parenthood and the Ukrainian informants' rationalisation for delaying the second birth were motivated by the will to secure family well-being in the two different contexts. Female employment was a crucial means for achieving it. Importantly, whether women returned to the labour market after giving birth or became housewives, they continued to presume and carry most of the responsibilities around childcare. The role that they played in securing family well-being, both in terms of material and emotional costs, as well as prior to and after childbearing, seems to have been important for increasing the costs of children and hence aspirations to decrease family size in the two structurally different contexts. As such, through the timing of parenthood and female employment, the costs of children became highly interlinked with the costs of contraception, especially for women, as we show in the next section.

### ***Costs of contraception***

The availability of different modern birth control methods – the pill in Switzerland and abortion in Ukraine – certainly implies that there were different contraceptive practices between the two contexts. However, when looking at this issue from the perspective of responsibilities, the private realities of women, at least, look more similar than different. In Switzerland, women accepted that they carried the responsibility for both traditional and modern methods, and gynaecologists often played a crucial role in informing women of these possibilities (Rusterholz, 2015b).<sup>18</sup> In Ukraine, while men continued to be perceived as responsible for birth control, it was often women who were responsible for the final decision on whether to keep the pregnancy or terminate it through abortion (Hilevych, 2015). As oral history accounts illustrate, in the post-war decades, Swiss and Ukrainian women, either openly or in a more nuanced way, started to carry the actual costs and burden of birth control, which could be seen as a latent factor in increasing the perceived costs of childrearing, especially among women.

The Swiss informant Monique, who was trained at a business school, married a post office employee and became a mother of two children, explains the reason why women had to be primarily responsible for birth control methods:

Monique: I asked my gynaecologist for birth control.

Interviewer: And did you discuss it with your husband?

Monique: My husband was not interested in this topic [birth control]. If I decided something, he would just follow me. It was not like today. At that time, it was a female responsibility to deal with fertility. Men did not know what to do about that...<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, methods of birth control differed according to the motivation to space or stop births among the Swiss couples. When a couple was trying to space births, natural methods of birth control appeared to be an agreeable solution, since they did not interfere with the spontaneity of the sexual act. However, when a couple wanted to stop having children, modern methods of birth control such as the pill and sterilisation were used, and women were the initiators of these methods, even when it was the husband who underwent sterilisation. For instance, Suzanne, born in 1930, used different methods of birth control according to her motivation to space or stop births. At the beginning of her marital life, she used the temperature method to delay the first pregnancy. Once she had her first child, since she was afraid to become pregnant again straight away, the couple used condoms alongside spermicide jelly. They stopped this method when they wanted a second child. Suzanne thought the method was efficient, but she found herself pregnant for a third time. Suzanne explained that the third child was an 'accident'. She then decided to ask her doctor for an efficient method of birth control:

Interviewer: And after the third child, how did you do to avoid becoming pregnant again?

Suzanne: My husband underwent a vasectomy. We discussed it because I did not want an additional child and since we had the same general practitioner I told the doctor, 'Could you please tell my husband to undergo a sterilisation?' This is how it went. My husband agreed.

In this context, the Swiss female informants who used traditional methods such as periodic abstinence also saw birth control as their responsibility. Women would calculate fertile days and avoided having sexual intercourse during that time. These women reported that their husbands 'became angry' when they refused sexual intercourse, suggesting that negotiations regarding sex did not always end in agreement. A way to avoid these tensions, as explained by these women, was to go to bed late in the evening when the husband was already asleep. This form of abstinence was presented as something imposed by the wife. Some women decided to use modern methods on their own without informing their husbands, and others decided which method they would use before informing their husbands.

Although some Swiss couples viewed birth control as a shared responsibility, even then women still took the initiative to ensure the effectiveness of the method used. These women reported having taught their husbands how to use the withdrawal method because they had acquired knowledge of the subject from books and discussions with friends and family. For instance, Sophie, a mother of three children, explained to her husband how to avoid pregnancy by practising withdrawal because she did not want a 'full house of children'. She stated that she also imposed abstinence on her husband: *I had to prevent intercourse. Otherwise, I would have got pregnant all the time.*<sup>20</sup>

Unlike in Switzerland, where women were able to openly exercise their agency in birth control decisions in order to achieve the desired family size, in Ukraine women often presumed ignorance in birth control. As couples typically practised withdrawal, which was perceived as men's responsibility, and was a method that frequently failed, women did however exercise their agency to seek abortions, often in order to continue working (Hilevych, 2015). This was especially prevalent when pregnancies following the first birth were unintended. In that case, some women would seek an abortion, sometimes consciously avoiding



informing their husbands, as shown by the example of Zinaida. Born in 1939, she worked as an accountant and after her first and only child she had an abortion: *I told him that I would not give birth. That's it.*<sup>21</sup>

By means of abortion, women were also trying to loosen the double burden of combining work and motherhood, and, as a result, were the ones who eventually decided on final family size. Varvara, who was mentioned earlier, illuminates this practice: *He (Varvara's husband) was like... whether we had five or one child, he would not care [...] He knew that anyway I will be the one taking care of them.*<sup>22</sup> It often happened that women were reluctant to discuss abortion with their husbands or other family members, such as mothers-in-law, because they knew that the latter might be in favour of keeping the child. At the same time, as the childcare responsibilities would still be on women while they also had to work, women were primarily interested in ensuring that the family size was affordable for the family. Despite the differences in childrearing strategies and methods of birth control, Swiss and Ukrainian women carried the primary burden of ensuring the effectiveness of birth control because it was they, not their husbands, who were primarily concerned about limiting family size and doing so effectively.

## Conclusions and discussion

In the context of post-war changes surrounded by both increasing possibilities to improve family living standards and widening access to modern birth control, especially in urban areas, smaller family size seems to have become a reflection of material opportunities and individual aspiration towards family well-being. The opportunities and constraints associated with the urban way of life were especially crucial in the individuals' definition of parental responsibilities. Many found the post-war opportunities to increase family well-being were drastically different from what they had experienced in their own childhood. At the same time, the urban way of life allowed observing the lives of others more closely, which facilitated many informants to adopt and feel pressured to submit to a new standard of parenthood. The new ideal of 'providing parents' entailed a child-centred view on parenting and became a central element in limiting family size on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

To achieve the new parenthood standard, the informants used a postponement strategy for the first birth in Switzerland and for the second birth in Ukraine. This strategy was driven by the same perception of the increasing costs of childrearing, while female employment, either before entering parenthood as in Switzerland or over the entire life course as in Ukraine, became a crucial means to secure family well-being. Our informants, who were the mothers of the 'baby-boom' generation, facilitated the adoption of a nearly universal female labour-force participation in the post-war decades by participating in the labour market to comply with the norm of being a providing parent.

In the West, this change coincided with the idea of being a full-time housewife as increasingly contested and, as a result, the issue of the bored housewife gained attention in the Western mass media (Rusterholz, 2017). By the end of the 1960s, although being a (part-time) working mother was motivated by different reasons in Switzerland than in Ukraine, it became an accepted model of motherhood in both countries. Being a good mother became synonymous with a providing and nurturing mother who contributed to the emotional stability and physical development of her child. Parents used their children's well-being as the main



motive for their birth control behaviours, and the healthy development of a child became an injunction for reducing family size for many parents by the end of the 1960s.

The increase in female labour participation should also be understood together with the introduction of modern birth control methods – the pill in Switzerland and abortion in Ukraine – that additionally stressed the primary role of women in family size decision. Women started to carry the responsibility of ensuring the effectiveness of birth control methods, be it for the traditional and male method in Switzerland or for the modern methods in Ukraine. Women who tried to be providing mothers both financially and emotionally had a strong incentive to take responsibility or to initiate the use of efficient methods of birth control. Small families with two or three children in Switzerland and one or two children in Ukraine emerged as the best way to achieve the children's well-being. In the Western European contexts, this finding nuances the idea that the baby bust resulted from the will of self-realisation instead of an altruistic investment in children. In the Soviet context, this aspiration goes along with the Soviet prioritisation of nuclear families during the Cold War decades (Hilevych, 2016b). In the broader context of the post-war universalisation of female secondary educational attainment and increase in female labour-force participation, these similar aspirations to primarily invest in the child's well-being certainly resulted in a changing perception on the part of women about investing in children and, consequently, in smaller family sizes, as previous studies also indicate (Van Bavel, 2014).

Finally, our findings illuminate that whereas the longing for smaller families and decreasing family size were achieved through different reproductive practices on two sides of the Iron Curtain, the constraints, possibilities and rationales surrounding parenthood decision in the urban setting were strikingly comparable. The growing and strengthening financial and emotional investment in children combined with the increasing costs of contraception placed on women could explain the stabilisation of the ideal family size around two children. These similarities could well reflect the fact that the Cold War competition indeed seemed to unify the view on private life and what family well-being entailed. Altogether, this study challenges the common assumption around the persistence of strikingly different demographic realities in Western and Eastern Europe by uncovering the mechanisms behind the stabilisation of family size around two-child family ideal in the post-war Europe.

## Notes

1. In the context of Ukraine, we refer to civil servants and working class people as representing the lower middle and working classes. This selection therefore excludes scientific and party elite, who can be considered upper-middle or upper class in the Soviet context.
2. Anne, Lviv, Ukraine, 2012.
3. Andrea, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2011.
4. Bernard, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.
5. Maksim, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2014.
6. Lotti, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.
7. Sylvie, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2011.
8. Véronique, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.
9. Martha, Lviv, Ukraine, 2014.
10. Maria, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2014.
11. Martine, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.
12. Kateryna, Lviv, Ukraine, 2013.
13. Marie-Jeanne, Fribourg, 2011.

14. Carlo, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2011.
15. Zoya, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2012.
16. Varvara, Lviv, Ukraine, 2013.
17. Silvio and Francesca, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2011.
18. In Switzerland, there were differences in the gynaecologists' attitudes and hence access to modern methods between Catholic and Protestant cantons (Rusterholz, 2015b). However, women's responsibilities for both traditional and modern methods of birth control were similar.
19. Monique, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.
20. Sophie, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2011.
21. Zinaida, Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2012.
22. Varvara, Lviv, Ukraine, 2013.

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